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In Praise of John Berger

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat

“The only inspiration which exists is the intimation of our own potential.”

– John Berger

On 2 January, Alan Riach was in Philadelphia taking part in the Modern Languages Association conference, beset by snow, visiting the Liberty Bell and rereading the Declaration of Independence, when Sandy Moffat emailed him with the sad news that John Berger had died. We'd both been talking about him after we'd watched the TV programme marking his 90th birthday in November 2016, *The Art of Looking*. We started to talk about him again after his death, trying to answer a few simple questions about why and how he had made such a lasting impression upon us both.

Sandy: Now looking back, we can see how great the scale of his achievement is. Foremost among our contemporaries, he insisted we address the questions about the relations between artists and peasants, and about the “lived experiences of the oppressed”. His books with Jean Mohr reinvented photo journalism, and *A Fortunate Man* (1967), about a country doctor, was truly extraordinary, showing clearly that relation between specialist knowledge there for the benefit of all, being practised in medicine as it must be practised in art. He seems to have given up writing about contemporary art in the 1960s and instead concentrated on specific old masters such as Poussin, Rubens and Breughel but his point was to demonstrate how relevant they are to our own times, more so indeed than the so-called “moderns”. As a result of that, we have to consider another, very different view of the modernist revolution. And then he leaves England and interestingly Geoff Dyer describes him as a “kind of honorary European”. So we have to ask, “What is his influence on today’s celebrity, big-money art world?” And the answer is, “Probably nil.” He must have been the most loathed man in London in the 1950s and 60s by the dealers and gallery owners. So who are his admirers? Where does his legacy take us?

Alan: When you talk about the scale of his achievement I think that’s something you can only really see looking at his work overall. People might argue that he’s not a great novelist or a great philosopher or a great political thinker, but he’s a far more important

writer than just about anyone who fits more neatly into any of these categories – a great example of the open mind, making enquiries, refusing exclusivity. In the first essay of his last book, *Confabulations* (2016), he says, “I picture myself not so much a consequential, professional writer, as a stop-gap man.” You met him, Sandy – what was he like?

Sandy: It’s part of that moment in time. I really only discovered Hugh MacDiarmid in the summer of 1962, and Scotland as a political and cultural entity began to take shape in my mind from that moment. As a young artist, I was asking myself, how could all of this be translated into painting? That was now the burning question. Developing a position as a figurative, human-centred painter was difficult in an art world that had placed abstraction first and foremost with figuration deemed retrograde and old-fashioned. There were few models to look to for inspiration and guidance. The first ever Max Beckmann exhibition at the Tate was not until 1965 and it took until 1981 before a work of his entered the collection. Picasso and Leger were however major figurative artists within the modernist canon and John Berger explained this: “Leger stands beside Picasso. Picasso is the painter of today: his greatness rests on the vitality with which he expresses our present conflicts. Leger is the painter of the future.” This was the moment I discovered Berger’s collected early essays on painters and painting, *Permanent Red* (1960). The idea that art might again bear more subject matter, might accommodate more of human life, rather than opt for yet another new style: this was at the heart of his criticism. No one else was saying this or asking what seemed straightforward questions about the content and meaning of works of art. No other critic dared to challenge the “sacred cows” of the time such as Henry Moore or Jackson Pollock. Berger saw Pollock’s inability to find a theme as a symptom of the decadence of the culture to which he belonged. That hit the mark. Berger took a long-term historical view and didn’t shy away from condemning works as bourgeois, formalist and escapist. Reading *Permanent Red* changed everything for me. Here at last was someone insisting on the importance of great art and the necessity of political engagement.

Alan: And that the two were related. When did you meet him?

Sandy: Our first meeting was in May 1966.

Alan: Berger was born in 1923, so he would be in his forties then, and you would be twenty or so.

Sandy: Yes. Berger gave a lecture at the Royal College of Art in London and afterwards John Bellany and myself introduced ourselves. We were both in our twenties,

John a little older than me. Berger had already awarded a prize to John for his work in the students' exhibition and we were invited to a further meeting at Berger's parents' house a couple of days later. As you can imagine, this was a momentous occasion and we were fortunate enough to be joined by Peter de Francia who would subsequently play an important part in our lives. Of course by this time we had read and greatly admired Berger's novel *A Painter of our Time* (1958) and also his highly controversial, *Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965). There was a lot to talk about that evening.

The first impact he made on us – a direct effect of reading him – was before that, though, during the open air Edinburgh Festival exhibitions of 1963, 64 and 65. Bellany and I decided that we would have to find ways of directly communicating with the public and bypassing the conventional art gallery would be the first step towards achieving this. All of our exhibitions were accompanied by printed introductory essays by Alan Bold containing numerous quotations from Berger. The idea that art was research into life and had nothing to do with putting "lovely" paintings up for sale was crucial. The key quote for me was, "the function of the original artist is to renew the tradition to which he belongs." That one had lasting value. What about you?

Alan: For me it's later, of course. I remember watching the TV series, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), when it first came out, and then buying the book and we talked about it in school. I'd have been a teenager. I remember the acknowledgement Berger gives to Walter Benjamin and going straight out to get a copy of *Illuminations*, Benjamin's book of essays, and realising when I read it that there was information here that was going to be vital for the rest of my life. Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) is a blueprint for future understanding of art in the technological era – its significance is massively escalated in what's happened with online technology since the 1990s. And Berger was onto that back then. But he also put the brakes on, he challenged anything glib as much as anything so established you felt you were being coerced to take it for granted. The debunking of the pious tones of so-called art critics or historians who saw painting as the preserve of the privileged, was so refreshing. But then the message kept coming. Look more closely. Think again. Whose interests are being served here? What gives you pleasure in a work of art and what makes it good? (These are not always the same thing.) When I went to New Zealand for work in 1986, Berger's essays were one of the half-dozen or so books I took with me: essential.

You mentioned his leaving England and becoming an “honorary European” and it occurs to me that this emphasises two aspects of his life and work. First, his Englishness. His first impact was in the context of the London-centred English – say British – art establishment and his range, in *Ways of Seeing*, was international from that point of origin. He was an English thinker, a dissenter, a voice of opposition, in the tradition of William Blake and Thomas Paine through to George Orwell and EP Thompson and I guess Iain Sinclair and this Englishness was determinedly not “British” or imperialist in any way. The second thing is that his choice to live among people in a peasant community and to understand by experience and residence, by habitation and participation, the way of life these people lived, was a negotiation of understanding between modernity and tradition. He brought together in his work as very few others have done – Hamish Henderson might be another – the progressive sense of modernity and the conservative rhythms of labouring people. “The Moment of Cubism” essay and the trilogy of novels, *Into Their Labours* (1979-91) represent opposite ends of the spectrum in that regard. In other words, modern art (which doesn’t mean just 20th or 21st-century art), when it’s any good, is as much a part of common humanity as sowing and harvesting, but the commercialisation and commodification of an international art economy is a loathsome imposition between what art delivers and what people might get from it.

Sandy: There’s a simple, practical demonstration of what you’re talking about in that 90th birthday TV programme. We see Berger playing a kind of serious game with his daughter. They have a rack of picture postcards of paintings. One at a time, each chooses a picture and invites the other to talk about what they see in it. The conversation is gentle, but acute, an exploration of the achievement of the artist whose work is represented, and the potential of anyone who might study art, simply to talk about it, patiently, attentively. It’s a great way of teaching, and a delight to watch.

Alan: We also see him sketching, drawing flowers or some items on a table, the attentiveness of his eyes, hands, the mediation of the artist between the paper under his hand and the reality in front of his eyes. These are such simple things, and so easily forgotten, and so valuable. They are acts of love. We neglect them at our peril.

Sandy: That’s the basis of all his work, the fiction, the political speculations, the art criticism, historical writing, commentary – the physical contact, the touching –

Alan: With his death, it's feels as if something has – not ended, but begun. Berger talks about this at the end of that essay, "The Moment of Cubism", and describes it as the moment of precipitation, just before the start of something we cannot imagine, like the orchestra in a concert hall just as the conductor raises his hand at the start of the evening, before the first sound is heard. Imagine listening to Beethoven's Third Symphony for the first time. Berger says this: "The moment at which a piece of music begins provides a clue to the nature of all art. The incongruity of that moment, compared to the uncounted, unperceived silence which preceded it, is the secret of art. What is the meaning of that incongruity and the shock which accompanies it? It is to be found in the distinction between the actual and the desirable. All art is an attempt to define and make this distinction *unnatural*."

Sandy: Pause on that. Don't most folk take it for granted that art is essentially "entertainment"? It's a luxury, commodified. It's not work, it's simply to be taken "naturally" pretty much as a gratification of vanity.

Alan: Exactly. And this won't do. Berger asks us to think again, to go further, to explore the *work* of art (his emphasis): "For a long time it was thought that art was the imitation and celebration of nature. The confusion arose because the concept of nature itself was a projection of the desired. Now we can see that art helps us to refuse the inadequacy of the given, and to want better."

Not to want more – to want better. The distinction is crucial. "Art mediates between our good fortune and our disappointment. Sometimes it mounts to a pitch of horror. Sometimes it gives permanent value and meaning to the ephemeral. Sometimes it describes the desired. The only inspiration which exists is the intimation of our own potential. [Art is what allows us to] see our past, while turning our back upon it. We suddenly become aware of the previous silence at the same moment as our attention is concentrated upon [what follows]. And it is precisely this which happens at the instant when a piece of music begins."